



FOCUS ON

Iraqi Regime's Assault on the Environment

ISSUE

The environment is as much a victim of the Saddam Hussein's failed policies as are the millions of dead and displaced people of the area.

Twenty-four years ago Iraq had the resources—water, arable land, human capital and petroleum—to become one of the most developed countries in the region. Instead, the regime has squandered Iraq's potential. The environmental degradation of the areas under Saddam's control reflects the tragic corruption and mismanagement prevalent in failed states like Iraq.

The regime has launched lengthy external and internal wars not to defend the nation but for the power, plunder and revenge of a small circle of leaders. It has deliberately and systematically destroyed vast natural resources to achieve its aims, leaving Iraq an environmental wasteland.

The regime typically denies all responsibility for environmental ills and blames others. Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz trumpeted the regime's lies in Johannesburg earlier this year when he said Iraq's environmental woes are tied to international sanctions and the effects of coalition bombing in 1991.

Aziz failed to mention that Baghdad is fully responsible for two of the most massive economic-environmental crimes in modern history: the destruction of Iraq's wetlands and the sabotage of Kuwait oil facilities that caused vast oil spills and the release of toxins into the atmosphere in the 1990s. The regime's use of chemical weapons has contaminated areas of northern and southern Iraq and Iran, leading to extraordinary rates of cancers, neurological disease, birth defects and other illnesses.

DESTRUCTION OF THE MARSHES

Before Saddam came to power, Iraq's southern marshes were one of the finest and most extensive natural wetlands ecosystems in Europe and western Asia. These marshes developed over thousands of years in the Tigris-Euphrates basin and once covered 15-20,000 square kilometers. According to two separate studies by the United Nations Environmental Program and the AMAR Charitable Foundation, between 84% and 90% of the marshes have been destroyed.



This photo of the vibrant life of the Iraqi marshlands was taken in 1974. In 1994, 60 percent of the wetlands were destroyed. In 2001 commercial satellite imagery showed that only 10-14 percent of Iraq's southern marshlands remain. (Corbis)

The regime has long wanted to control this area at any cost. Captured Iraqi documents revealed that the regime had a plan as early as 1987 to deliberately drain the marshes to permit military access and greater political control of the native Marsh Arabs.



Nothing slowed the regime's engineering plan—not peace with Iran, not war with Kuwait, not declining oil revenue or the alleged effects of U.N. sanctions.

Canals, dykes and dams were built routing the water of the great Tigris and Euphrates Rivers around the marshes, instead of allowing water to move slowly through the marshland as it had done for millennia.

Some of these works were diabolical in scope: when part of the Euphrates was dried up due to re-routing its water quickly to the sea, a dam had to be built on the Euphrates so water could not back up from the Tigris and sustain the former marshland. The regime burned marshlands and buried pipes underground to help carry away water to help the marshes dry up faster.

Inherent in this destruction is the disappearance of one of the world's most lush ecosystems: the salt-tolerant vegetation, the plankton rich waters that fed Gulf spawning grounds, 52 native fish species, the wild boar, red fox, buffalo and water birds of the marsh habitat.



A view of the interior of the unique reed architecture built by the people of the Iraqi marshes. The marshes were once home to 500,000 Marsh Arabs. (Corbis/1974)

It is estimated that less than 10,000 of the indigenous people remain. Up to 100,000 Marsh Arabs are refugees in Iran. Another 100,000 are spread all over the world, political refugees from 1991, but most Marsh Arabs are among Iraq's estimated one million internally displaced people. Saddam's regime has effectively destroyed this unique and ancient culture.



There are over 200,000 Iraqis among Iran's population of 2.3 million refugees. Of these about 95,000 are Shi'as from southern Iraq, including Marsh Arabs. They are isolated and feel trapped. Most want to return to their homeland, according to the AMAR International Charitable Foundation, which assists the refugees in camps like these. (AMAR)

ENVIRONMENTAL SABOTAGE



Having failed to achieve their military aims in Kuwait, Saddam's forces did massive, irreparable damage to the environment before fleeing. Beginning in January 1991, Iraqi forces opened the control taps feeding oil from storage tanks and tankers directly into the Gulf. They released 11 million barrels of oil, roughly 12 times the amount oil carried by the tanker "Prestige" now polluting the coasts of Spain, Portugal and France.



The Iraqi-engineered oil slick contaminated 600 miles of Gulf coast. Thousands of water birds died as a result of the pollution. The Gulf's aquatic ecosystem, which sustained shrimp, sea turtles, dugongs, whales, dolphins and fish, was seriously damaged. These photos were taken along the Kuwaiti coastline on January 24, 1991. (Corbis)



In February 1991, Iraqi forces systematically destroyed 1,164 Kuwaiti oil wells—nearly 92 per cent of the total number of wells in Kuwait. Plans were captured afterwards that demonstrated conclusively the enormous effort the Iraqi regime put into this plan. Over 700 of those booby-trapped wells ignited, spewing toxins into the atmosphere. Through an extraordinary international effort, these oil fires were extinguished nine months later.

The damaged wells released 60 million barrels of oil into the desert, forming oil lakes that contaminated 49 square kilometers of Kuwait's fragile topsoil and continues to affect Kuwait's ground water.

Toxic fumes released by the oil fires. Kuwait 1991 (IIP)



In the six months that Iraq occupied Kuwait, its forces laid nearly two million land mines—92 land mines per square kilometer. They also left Kuwait littered with 6.3 tons of ammunition and 57 trenches per square kilometer. Landmines like these still threaten children in northern Iraq.

Prostheses, Halabja, northern Iraq, 2001 (Rubin)

CORRUPTION, REGIME POLITICS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Although Iraq prevents most international monitoring of environmental events, there are credible reports from Iraqis in northern Iraq and outside Iraq that environmental conditions inside Iraq are deteriorating because of regime policies.

According to Iraqi engineers now outside the country, the regime has allowed the drinking water system to collapse, particularly those of the southern cities of Karbala and Najaf, in order to discourage the growth of politically active Shia urban centers. With the money and expertise used to drain the southern marshes, the regime could have rapidly rebuilt all the pumping stations it claims were damaged in Operation Desert Storm.

In conjunction with the regime's massive engineering schemes, Iraqi experts also report that Saddam has diverted irrigation water in the fertile central region to support farms owned by his loyalists. Lands owned by others receive less water.

The overall effect of the regime's policies has been a greater salinization of Iraq's arable land. This jeopardizes the fertility of this important land.

Iraqis now in exile also report that hundreds of thousands of date palm trees have been uprooted by the regime, according to an Iraqi hydrologist now living abroad. Iraq had over 30 million palms providing food and protecting a delicate ecosystem under their shade. The relative few that remain, particularly in the south, are diseased, causing Iraqi exiles to suspect the regime is using or testing more chemical agents in the area.

Fruit trees in Assyrian communities in the north were uprooted and destroyed, forcing farmers off their lands, either into exile or into cities where they could be more easily controlled.